DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 076 073 FL 004 022

AUTHOR	Deeken, Hans Werner
TITLE	Language Teaching: Crisis or Opportunity.
INSTITUTION	Washington Association of Foreign Language Teachers, Pullman.
PUB DATE	Jan 73
NOTE	7p.; Paper presented at the annual conference of the Washington Association of Foreign Language Teachers, Seattle, Washington, October 21, 1972
JOURNAL CIT	W.A.F.L.T. Forum; v5 n2 p15-21 Jan 1973
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Community Attitudes; Educational Change; *Educational Status Comparison; Instructional Program Divisions; *Language Instruction; Modern Languages; Professional Associations; *Second Language Learning; *Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The nature and dimensions of the crises facing the language teaching profession are explored in this speech. Community and teacher attitudes must be redirected if language learning is to remain at the center of humanistic education. In achieving such change, teachers are exhorted to become "consumer-oriented" and utilize existing media to their advantage. Coordination of local, regional, state, and national associations having an interest in foreign language instruction is seen as being essential to the development of a united profession. (RL)

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

From: The W.A.F.L.T. Forum; Vol. 5, No. 2, January 1973.

ED 076073

REPORTS, PAPERS, AND ABSTRACTS FROM THE ANNUAL STATE CONFERENCE, SEATTLE, OCTOBER 20-21, 1972

LANGUAGE TEACHING: CRISIS OR OPPORTUNITY?

Hans Werner Deeken, Executive Secretary, A.A.T.G.

After so many years we have a reason to rejoice. All of us in language study have at last come to an agreement. Instead of balking at change and bickering with each other, we have reached unity: We have agreed that there may be a crisis.

If this crisis, imagined or real, were one only of our making we might be well advised to look simply within our profession to search for the proper solution. But, as language teaching professionals, we are part of a much larger community, a community which is directly involved with our plight today. If there indeed is a crisis in the teaching of languages, then there must be a crisis in education as a whole.

Education is our mission -- student teacher, language supervisor, dean or scholar -- we are educators. ---At least, that is what we call ourselves.

The symptoms of our present day problems showed up a long time ago. We allowed the American public to be satisfied with schools providing often less than 25 per cent of their space for intellectual pursuits. We allowed universities to curtail their universal mission by delegating the education of young learners to assistants and by narrowing the focus of scholarship from looking outside and around to looking inward only, and then often only at ourselves. We allowed teachers in the secondary schools to pass on driveling content from past decades to an increasingly bored student body. We escaped into formula methods, often substituting technique for substance. We allowed the same institutions which were responsible for teacher training before NDEA to organize programs for the correction of their own mistakes -- only for more money this time. We formed professional organizations emphasizing diversity rather than a common concern, and we almost matched the legendary proliferous talents of the rabbit family. The more we sensed that something wasn't quite going as it should, the more we published, wrote, talked, met, conferred, and moved hither and yon', breeding the peripatetic educator, who circles around, endlessly seeking his mission and -- in reality seeking himself.

The time to pause is more than overdue. We -- who have picked the term "articulation" to label the organic progression from one educational phase to another, are rather inarticulate when we attempt to define our own position. We are teaching in today's world, but today is not much more than the articulation from yesterday to tomorrow. The present is the juncture between past and future. Education must prepare for that which comes, building upon the basis of that which was.

FL004022

All America's High School "Class of 1984" entered the first grade this September. And in the same year of 1984, the proverbial College Of Our Choice will hold commencement exercises for the 10-year old who today is riding a minibike, learning of the pill, free speech and the techniques of bugging which are required so that BIG BROTHER can make independent thinking unnecessary and even dangerous.

Pressing a button and reacting to programmed stimuli has been learned by now. Conditioning is in progress in 20,000 schools throughout this country. But -- and this is an important point to raise -- will those who are in our class rooms and lecture halls today, will they have learned to tolerate, to anticipate, to draw independent conclusions? Will they have learned to articulate emotions in intelligible words, to modify thoughts, to express knowledge, to ask and reason with others? Will they have learned to be creative? Creativity is not a manual skill. Creativity is a matter of mind and soul. Beethoven conceived the 9th Symphony without the help of hearing. Michelangelo had no computer model for the Sistine Chapel. Einstein had only his creativity and no systems analysis to aid him in the formulation of his theories.

Yet, to Americans, the most acceptable hero is still predominantly physically robust, the athlete, the fighter, the tough guy, and not the thinker, the dreamer, the reader, the questioner. We do have a "President's Council on Physical Fitness" -- Let us ask -- in 1972 more than in any other year -- Where is the "President's Council on Intellectual Growth?"

Never mind attaching the blame to one man or one position. We -- you and I -- have tolerated that it is unpopular to admit to an interest in reading and thinking -- in preference to playing football. You and I have tolerated that Foreign Languages were clearly defined as "foreign", foreign to any red-blooded American, foreign to anything which really counts, and, of course, foreign to education.

This phenomenon is strange, as I have often said. It is an American idiosyncrasy. It cannot be found in educational systems elsewhere -- either in small countries or in continental ones like China or Russia. We are the ones who are out of step whether we like to admit it or not. If we accept the role of education as one of systematically developing man's moral and intellectual faculties, if education is future-oriented on the basis of a strong understanding of our heritage and past, then the language teacher and the scholar are right in the center of education, more so than almost anyone else.

Languages are immensely and uniquely human. They are the core of the humanities. Languages bridge the distance between soul and mind. Languages are the key to the search for comparison and contact between cultures. Languages challenge us to discipline our thoughts, to tolerate different modes of thinking, to accept other ways of expression, to listen to the manner in which strangers express their convictions and to adjust and adapt our signals to

the frequencies of strange receivers. Languages are alive, they have grown from the past to today and continue to grow. They merge and mingle, change and expand. They are a tool. A tool for communication so that we may express for now or the future the thinking, the suffering and the hope, the understanding and the misunderstanding of our time.

Languages are all of this. And occasionally, they may even help us to increase our salaries and to travel without a pocket dictionary, but we are not teaching languages for that alone. We believe in the teaching of languages as an irreplaceable element of education for every American.

The language educator -- what is he and what motivates him? Well, in our dreams he may be the master teacher, the stimulator, the inobtrusive leader without selfishness, the sounding board, the bridge builder. In our dreams, he provides access to the arts, he aids in self-fulfillment. He is a person able to enrich leisure, to help in spiritual and material advancement. He or she, as the case may be, walks into the classroom or lecture hall, free from penned-up complexes, an attractive human being, no matter what age, ready to respond rather than regiment, eager to share and compare rather than shying away and cloistering the misunderstood riches of a superior culture. The language educator of our dreams knows that mistakes are human and tolerates as he expects to be tolerated. He sees no conflict between French and German, Spanish and Swahili, English and Russian. He has no time for fake battles where the lines are drawn between language and literature, between ALM and traditional, between the audio-visual and what else methods. This teacher is a truly great person.

It may not be pleasant, but it is useful and wholesome to look at ourselves without make-up and in the bright light of the day. How broad is our knowledge? Have we learned to outgrow the methods fever in order to concentrate on meaning? Are the texts still our dictators, rather than our tools? Are we directing publishers or do they dictate the pace of change in response to their dwindling inventories of old titles? Do we yield to new machines just because they are new? Conversely, do we condemn advances in techniques just because we have not mastered them?

This is the age of consumerism. There are watchful eyes scrutinizing labels and slogans and insisting on honesty. Let us first of all, therefore, become consumer-oriented. The attitudes which our students bring into the classrooms are set long before they come to us. We can at most modify them. Our opinion of the language or culture we teach means next to nothing to the student when the first curriculum choice is made. Student opinions are set by parents, friends and once in a while even a counselor or two. The stereotypes which we have to overcome are rooted elsewhere. So it behooves us to learn about them and their basis. The National Observer, The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, just as the Daily News, the local Courrier, the TV set and the comic strip all contribute to the prejudices or opinions

of our students. Let's look at the ones we don't normally read. Mad Magazine, Cosmopolitan, Playboy, just as much as Evergreen, Ramparts, and the Atlantic Monthly or the National Geographic help to set attitudes. A car magazine speaking about foreign racers plays a part. So do the financial news and the Wall Street Journal when father and mother at home fret about foreign competition or the dollar crisis.

Certainly, your students do not receive their opinions from Corriere della Sera, Le France-Soir, or Frankfurter Zeitung. Even less from MLJ, FL Annals or PMLA. Why not get together within our schools with our colleagues from all departments, not just languages and English, but also philosophy, history, art and music and whoever else might want to join in to form reading task groups. Each participant assumes the responsibility to read one or two publications or watch a newscast to note and clip items of interest for all concerned. These then get posted under various headings on a bulletin board where students can get at them as well. (Don't say it cannot be done. The physical education teacher in a school near my home called the German teacher's attention to an article in Sports Illustrated where the young Australian swimmer Shane Gould was quoted as saying that she had no trouble with keeping her schedule in Munich. She knew German).

Let us be consumer-oriented. There is a "Truth in Advertising Law" for products and it should apply to us, too. When NDEA entered the scene of education, the languages were included with great fanfare and all conceivable pragmatic reasons were cited. First and foremost, we were told that the Russian Sputnik was -- not to a small degree -- brought about by Russian schools offering more foreign languages. The US was to improve its position in technology as compared to the Soviet Union by all kinds of devices, among them the increased learning of languages. That, of course, was as cockeyed then as it is now. It missed the point entirely. Only now we are again becoming aware that the teaching of languages different from our native tongue is something more than teaching a communication skill. We cautiously approach the public with the message that, perhaps, the neglect of general humanistic education in favor of specialist oriented skill training may have contributed to much of our educational woes.

We may be convinced that the teaching of languages is an essential humanistic learning experience, a part of the liberal arts. But, let's face it. Where are the language teachers equipped to fulfill this promise of broad assistance for a humanistic education via the study of a foreign language? Where are the colleges and universities where this broad approach is being developed with future teachers? There are some, but by far not enough to justify too much hope or too many promises.

If we really believe -- and I for one do -- that language teaching is an essential part of a general humanistic education, then it is up to us to take the initiative with other disciplines. There are many ways by which symposia or seminars, at first at individual

institutions of higher learning and later, on a statewide basis, can lead to a meeting of minds and a harmonizing among a variety of voices. Here, higher education must lead, not for its own sake, but in order to build the foundations for a re-adjustment of the processes which we hope will result in future teachers being able to fill their role as educators in the classical sense.

Let us also avoid half-truths. Forget about the cheap ruse of promising only fun where we know that hard and often tedious work and practice are needed. Certainly, no one beginning to learn the piano or violin, or starting with his first paint set can be faked for more than a day or two into accepting as a lark what in reality is work. There is real and great satisfaction in the mastery of something difficult. This satisfaction should be enlarged by recognition given to students not just in front of their peers, but also in front of PTA, school assemblies and in front of the community at large.

Let us also forget about petty jealousies. It really makes very little difference whether we are teachers of French, German, Italian, Slavic Languages or Spanish. All our professional organizations are already meeting jointly and repeatedly to further the cause. Let's follow suit and bury the hatchet of imagined personality differences and phoney excuses. If we are educators, believing in FL education, why should we fight each other?

Let us rather find a formula to do business with each other on all levels, national, state, and local. Conceivably state foreign language teacher associations, would have governing bodies or Executive Committees in which the presidents of local or state chapters of any language discipline group (such as the AAT's) would be seated or directly represented with a full vote.

It is conceivable that the same could take place in ACTFL.

It is even conceivable that competition for membership could be reduced and the assault on the pocket books of language teachers diminished. Imagine for a moment that the various language associations would agree to carry the coordinating work of ACTFL. There might be a small jump in their fees, but a saving in paying dues to ACTFL - and thereby a net gain.

There might even be a journal or two less than before -- allowing us to read the ones we receive rather than simply checking the table of content. (And there would be less competition for the advertising income and thereby a sounder base for all).

I know that all the things I mention would call for a real change of mind and heart on the part of many of us.

I could find it conceivable, also, that the language conferences now held across the country from the North-East to the South and West could be coordinated in themes and programs and that one of them would be selected each year as the national annual meeting of a united language profession -- offering the best of each

regional session -- and providing the opportunity for future planning. (Perhaps we could even return Thanksgiving to the status of family holiday).

There will be fewer committees, less diversification, and more economy and selection. The idea may not be attractive to many, but might it not be good for all?

Where there are special needs - let us create task forces with a specified job and defined date of dissolution.

And on the local level, I could see the day where education becomes a common concern and not a catch-as-catch-can for the student, to select between competing sub-elements.

Have the FL teachers take the initiative and form a school council on humanities. Have English, philosophy, the arts, social studies, and whoever else help you. Call on special outside skills. Don't try to compete with professional public relations men, radio and TV writers. Why not include them in your work when they can help.

Let us mix it up a bit. Have adults join our language classes during day time. Or have students (for credit) join us in evening courses where they exist. Organize the language clubs in your schools; create national coordinating affiliations (as the German students did). Open up the clubs to non-majors -- even to evening school participants. Hold colloquia with fellow teachers and parents, politicians and counselors. Ask the merchant, the broker, the dealers to listen to our concerns. And have them share in our lessons and work by telling our students about their way of dealing with foreign concerns.

Ideas are not discipline-bound. It is conceivable that we might one day all grow a mite taller ourselves -- because we have helped others to grow.

You and I are dedicated to the profession of FL education, not because we could not find anything else, but because we chose this career in preference to easier ones, because it offers more bang for the buck, more results for the efforts, more rewards for the sacrifice, more satisfaction because it has more meaning.

The hour has come to lay to rest the conceit of partisanship and piousness. There may never be more opportunities than this crisis has brought us.

Some time ago, I called for proof to be posted by those who claim they can raise a new generation of Americans without the teaching of languages, of understanding, of tolerance, and communication. Now I must call on you to make the point -- a point to be heard.

Let it be known from Washington State to Key West, Florida, and from Bangor, Maine, to the Port of San Diego, that the language teachers of America are educators for a new generation. They are

holding in trust the access to a large heritage which to American students, a new generation to come, can be but a challenge to live up to. You and I saw crisis and in this crisis we saw opportunity. We chose opportunity over crisis, and we gave up lament in favor of leadership.

(Mr. Deeken read this paper at the annual state conference of WAFLT, Seattle, October 21, 1972. Ed.)

††